

Testimony on HB 344:

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Janet Cahill and I have been director of Violence Free Crisis Line, in Kalispell, for almost 22 years. I have provided services to thousands of women and children who have been terrorized in their homes because of domestic violence over the 28 years I have worked in the field. So I have had plenty of opportunity to assess the needs of women and children. One of their greatest needs once they leave the violent situation and seek safety in a shelter or safe home, is not to be required to have contact with their abuser. Many women obtain orders of protection which restricts the abuser from making any contact in person, by phone, or through a third party. The only method used to force women to have contact is the court requirement to allow visitation between the abusive parent and their children. During the visits, the abuser has an opportunity to question the children about their mother's whereabouts and activities, pass information they want the mother to hear, give gifts that symbolize something to the mother, and to manipulate the visitation times and places. They can intimidate and threaten with just a look. This has created danger for women who are already terrified.

In the past few years new programs have been developed to provide supervised visitation and safe exchange of children. These facilities are designed so that the parents do not have contact when bringing or picking up children. Supervised visits, ordered by the court due to an order of protection, are monitored by trained staff who understand and can prevent the manipulative behaviors that abusers may use. Currently there are three such centers in the State of Montana. However, funding for operating expenses is difficult to obtain. Fees could be charged for services, but most

of the women using the services have been cut off from the financial resources in their relationship and even if they are employed, may not have the funds for the visits. After leaving it takes time to save enough for new housing and food for their children, the basic priorities.

Funding for these programs is available from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, Safe Haven Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Program. This funding is limited and very competitive. State funding of a pilot project would provide information regarding the cost of operating such a program and demonstrate the effectiveness of these services. The facility in Kalispell where I live has provided services in the past but has been forced to limit the number served due to severe budget cuts. As you can imagine most of these visits occur in the evening or on weekends when parents are not working. This requires staff to work evenings and weekends as well as daytimes during the week. This increases personnel costs, making such an operation labor-intensive. In light of current economic conditions it will be even more difficult for centers who are non-profit organizations to keep their doors open.

The information gained from the pilot would serve as a model for other areas in the state who wish to start these programs. Please consider passing HB 344 as a safeguard for women and children. With its passage, injuries, even deaths may be prevented.